With *Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba*, award-winning author Margarita Engle has made a unique and I believe important contribution to young adult literature concerning the second World War, addressing the international diaspora of refugees from Nazi Germany. Her earlier works, such as *The Poet Slave of Cuba*, have already garnered prominent honors such as ALA Notable Book and ALA Best Book for Young Adults, among others. The publication of this book about Jewish Holocaust refugees in the Americas situates her writing among major works of WWII historical fiction for young adults, including Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars*, the 1990 Newbery winner. Indeed, it would seem natural to pair these texts with related works of young adult non-fiction including the frequently
assigned *Diary of Anne Frank* as well as Alexa Dvorson's *The Hitler Youth: Marching Toward Madness* (2002).

Engle achieves a truly global perspective on tragic events unfolding in Europe at the time by providing a glimpse of the lives of individual children, including refugees living elsewhere in the world. While the tropical republic of Cuba is seemingly at a far remove from the theater of European battles, the book actually opens with the arresting image of the young narrator Daniel witnessing his own Grandfather’s murder in Berlin. While grounded in established historical accounts, Engle's text takes on a heightened credibility by way of its extraordinary empathy. Moreover, by employing the voices of several young narrators, she gives a truly human face to such dire times.

Those familiar with the format of Karen Hesse’s *Out of the Dust* will feel quite at home with this volume of what might be termed *linked verse*. Compact and accessible, these often lyrical pieces raise ethical issues that are vexing in their complexity. She offers the customary disclaimer that while characters portrayed are “entirely imaginary,” on the other hand, “situations and major events in the book are factual” (195). Drawing on Robert Levine’s *Tropical Diaspora, The Jewish Experience in Cuba* (1993), Engle distills the historical record into a cohesive sequence of poems.

Much like a collection of interlocking short stories structured as a cohesive whole, the poems in *Tropical Secrets* progress in a logical sequence, linked by both themes and images. The book is unified by the passage time as well, organized into four chronological sections spanning June, 1939–April, 1942. Within each section, we hear the voices of several narrators, predominantly two youths: Daniel, a Jewish refugee from Germany now in Cuba separated from his family; and Paloma, a Cuban girl whose father is a corrupt government official who holds the fate of newly arrived refugees in his hands. Other voices include those of Paloma’s father and David, a Jewish emigre from Russia who takes Daniel under his wing. As the story unfolds, it repeatedly focuses on themes of difference and tolerance. After all, in terms of language alone, the immigrant community in Cuba is home to German, Russian, and Yiddish. While gradually acquiring Spanish, Daniel imagines learning English might someday serve as a passport to safety. And there is the all important issue of religious freedom: German Jews among Cuban Catholics.

Indeed, Engle herself seems rather uniquely positioned to portray such a perplexing situation, and to provide the insight that literature allows into its emotional complexities. After all, while her own mother was a Cuban Catholic, her father was the child of “Ukrainian Jewish parents [who] fled the anti-Semitic violence that destroyed their village near Kiev.” In short, she tells us, “My parents were not raised in the same culture or the same faith. They did not speak the same language” (197). Moreover, viewing the situation through the eyes—and in the words—of youthful narrators, provides an especially poignant and tender portrait of the dangers and uncertainties, the vulnerability and vertigo. But ultimately,
human universals such as a love of music and compassion for others turn *Tropical Secrets* into an uplifting novella in verse. What emerges, remarkably, seems a song of hope.

**Works Cited**


**About the Author**

**Christian Knoeller**, Associate Professor of English at Purdue, has published poetry widely over the past thirty years. His collection Completing the Circle received the Millennium Prize from Buttonwood Press. He holds an MFA from the University of Oregon and a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley. In 2007, he was awarded the Jill Barnum Midwestern Heritage Prize by the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature.